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SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 ANXIOUS, CONFUSED AFTER STRATEGY MEETING

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) An anxious Minister of Social Affairs Nayla Mouawad on November 13 described a divided March 14 coalition strategy meeting the night before. While Christian leaders urged a half-plus-one presidential election (should no presidential solution be found before the expiration of Emile Lahoud's term), Sunni and Druse leaders strongly opposed an absolute majority election without strong international support or the Patriarch's support. The Muslims feared it would provoke Sunni-Shia clashes. The meeting did not produce a roadmap for the remaining period before the scheduled election, and left March 14 members anxious, confused, and seeking external direction and support. Mouawad repeatedly pled with the Ambassador for U.S. intervention with the French and the Patriarch, arguing that "if we lose the election, you lose with us." Mouawad has had limited success reaching out to opposition Christians to preempt security problems in the north. End summary.

MARCH 14 CHRISTIANS URGE HALF-PLUS-ONE,
SUNNI, DRUSE LEADERS MORE CAUTIOUS

2. (C) An anxious Minister of Social Affairs Nayla Mouawad, accompanied by her son Michel, described for the Ambassador and Econoff on November 13 disagreements within the March 14 coalition that emerged during a recent strategy meeting. Much of the meeting focused on "what if" -- what if there are no presidential elections before the expiration of Emile Lahoud's presidential term at midnight on 11/23. While Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea and other Christian leaders urged the group to move forward with a half-plus-one (absolute majority) presidential election, others expressed fear that U.S. and European support is not strong enough to protect the coalition against opposition backlash. Druse leader Walid Jumblatt strongly opposed an absolute majority election without strong international support or the Patriarch's support; he told the group he feared that sectarian fighting will begin in areas under his protection.

3. (C) Saad Hariri also cautioned that international support was not strong enough to face down the likely Sunni-Shia tension that would follow a half-plus-one election, Mouawad said. Hariri claimed that only his call to the Iranian Ambassador had stopped Sunni-Shia clashes that started after Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah's fiery November 11 speech. Tripoli bloc leader Mohamed Safadi was also

preoccupied with fear of a Sunni-Shia conflict at the meeting. He argued that if such a sectarian conflict starts in Lebanon it will quickly spread throughout the region, and March 14 will be held responsible.

14. (C) Prime Minister Fouad Siniora made a rare appearance at a March 14 strategy meeting, Mouawad told us, to reassure the Christians that if no president is elected and the cabinet assumes presidential powers in accordance with the constitution, Siniora could expand the cabinet to add March 14 Maronite representation. Mouawad observed that Siniora and Hariri had studied closely how the cabinet would assume presidential powers, but were not eager to go in that direction, as they perceived that path to be just as risky as an absolute majority election. However, incorporating more March 14 Maronites into the cabinet, as Siniora promised, would grate on the opposition Christian blocs of Michel Aoun and Elie Skaiff.

WITHOUT A ROADMAP,
SEEKING U.S. INTERVENTION

15. (C) The strategy meeting clearly did not provide a roadmap or an action plan for the remaining period before the rescheduled election (now set for November 21), and left March 14 members anxious, confused, and seeking external direction and support, Mouawad said. She repeatedly pled with the Ambassador for U.S. intervention, arguing that "if we lose the election you lose with us." Dismissive of the French initiative, Mouawad did not feel that having just any president would be an improvement over current president Emile Lahoud, and worried that if an even merely mildly pro-Syrian president were elected, March 14 members would be

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threatened. Mouawad dubbed Nasrallah's speech, in which he said Hizballah wants control over all national decisions and wants to keep Hizballah's state within a state and its weapons, the most worrying in her life. Nasrallah's speech puts an end to the Iranian redline against Sunni-Shia conflict, Mouawad argued.

16. (C) Mouawad asked for U.S. assistance to urge the Vatican to pressure the unreliable Maronite Patriarch Sfeir to support March 14 presidential candidates. She also asked for U.S. support to end the French initiative, which "officialized" Syria's return to Lebanon by giving Syria a role in the presidential election without accommodating March 14's conditions. Mouawad was confused by the French initiative, designed to filter a short-list of candidates' names through the Patriarch, Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri, and Hariri before a final parliamentary vote.

17. (C) After much discussion and urging by the Ambassador to try to make the French initiative an opportunity rather than a trap, Mouawad decided to urge Geagea and the Patriarch to include Michel Khoury and Charles Rizk on the list of candidates requested by the French, in the hope of electing a compromise president acceptable to March 14. She Mouawad planned to see Geagea and the Patriarch late on November 13 to discuss their lists of names. At least trying to cooperate with the French initiative would give March 14 cover if they eventually need to conduct an absolute majority election, she mused.

LIMITED COMMUNICATION
WITH TO THE OPPOSITION

18. (C) Mouawad has had limited success reaching out to opposition Christians ahead of the scheduled election. Mouawad's son Michel on November 8 took advantage of the birth of opposition Christian leader Suleiman Franjieh's daughter to pay a congratulatory call and discuss security issues in their common hometown of Zgharta. Franjieh

reportedly gave Michel assurances that there would not be security clashes between March 14 and opposition Christians in Zghorta or the north, but warned that the constitutional problems would continue beyond any election. Separately, Michel noted persistent rumors that Franjeh's Marada group is opening new offices or "arsenals" in the north, receiving arms in boxes marked "Islamic Republic of Iran."

¶9. (C) Separately, Mouawad noted she had spoken to opposition member and Zahle bloc leader Elie Skaff's wife Miriam (a cousin to Samir Geagea's wife Setrida) at a November 8 dinner party. Skaff has been threatened since publicly stating he was free to take whatever action he deemed necessary after November 14, his wife alleged. (Note: Skaff is an ally of Michel Aoun, and presumably this refers to the notion that Skaff suggested publicly that he would feel free to attend parliament and be part of a quorum during the last ten days of the scheduled election period November 14-24, even if the rest of the Aoun bloc did not participate. End note.)

COMMENT

¶10. (C) Echoing Sitt Nayla's comments, many observers have told us that serious cracks appeared in the March 14 movement during the tense 11/12 meeting. Several participants told us that, for the first time ever, March 14 was divided almost entirely along Christian-Muslim lines -- a dangerous development. Since that meeting, shuttle diplomacy by those courageous enough to brave the security risks have promoted reconciliation, and we do not see a risk of a formal March 14 split now. But the French initiative and the presidential elections are increasing internal strains in a movement that needs to stay united through the difficult days of government formation ahead, even if presidential elections pass successfully.

¶11. (C) Sitt Nayla's comments reflect a general sense of unease among March 14 leaders about what happens if there is no presidential election before the midnight 11/23 expiration of Emile Lahoud's term in office. March 14 Christians -- including Nayla -- tend to favor shifting quickly toward "half-plus-one" absolute majority presidential elections, to fill the vacuum. The March 14 Muslims, fearful of the potential for a violent reaction from March 8, tend to favor

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allowing the Siniora cabinet to assume the powers of the presidency ad interim (per Article 62 of the Constitution), allowing some time to pass before moving toward presidential elections. The Muslims argue that electing a president with "half-plus-one" becomes easier if March 8 takes the first provocative step, reacting against the Siniora cabinet assuming presidential powers ad interim.

¶12. (C) Of course, at one level, this discussion is moot: in his bellicose 11/11 speech, Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah ruled out both options as unacceptable and hinted ominously that Hizballah would permit neither to occur. The question for March 14 leaders to ponder is which option, since both will be rejected -- possibly violently -- by Hizballah (and probably Aoun), gives them more internal, domestic, and international strength.

¶13. (C) Sitt Nayla's concerns about the French initiative to solve the presidential elections are also representative of the feelings of March 14 Christians more generally: they fear that, prodded by the French, Saad Hariri and Nabih Berri will take the weakest choice from a list drawn up by the Patriarch. They fret that, despite the Patriarch's blessing, the candidate will have no credibility or popularity among the Christians. As Michel Aoun has publicly distanced himself from the French initiative, he could cultivate Christian "street" resentment over the choice, in order to increase his own popularity at the expense of March 14

Christians. March 14 Christians fear losing their own Christian credibility (already battered by Aoun's incessant and often vicious propaganda against them) by being part of a solution that keeps the presidency out of their hands.

¶14. (C) Samir Geagea is the most extreme of this view, telling the Ambassador explicitly on 11/13 that he would back Aoun for the presidency if Berri and Hariri would back Robert Ghanem. We are telling our contacts that they have no other option than to back the French initiative all the way. If the French initiative collapses, it should do so because of March 8 intransigence, we note, not March 14 rejection.
FELTMAN